The Iroquois Theater
by
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During the second decade of this century, the world of American entertainment was forever changed by a widespread proliferation of independent African-American vaudeville houses. In response to institutional Jim Crowism, these new theaters sponsored black entertainment for black audiences. They staged all manner of singers, dancers and musicians, along with male and female impersonators, contortionists, magicians, ventriloquists and myriad other acts. In addition, each theater had its own two-piece piano and trap-drum pit band, often augmented by a horn or two. It was in the uninhibited, self-determined environment of this subcultural network of little theaters that some of the first commercial reverberations of blues and jazz were felt.

There has been a tendency to overlook the historical relationship between vaudeville theaters and blues and jazz. Frederick Ramsey felt that "the participatory" nature of jazz could not be fully realized in a theater setting which impeded interaction between the musicians and the audience."¹ Contemporaneous black press reports suggest that early African-American vaudeville theater settings fairly thrived on interaction between performers and audience. Reviewing a 1917 performance by future Race recording artist Mattie Dorsey, the Indianapolis Freeman noted, "when she sings those blues, all you can hear them say is 'sing 'em gal, sing 'em,' and she leaves them spellbound."² In terms of participatory "feedback," the new black vaudeville theater audiences were not unlike the "shouting," dance-in-the-aisle congregations of store-front Baptist churches.

The specter of black-face makeup may have also caused jazz historians to look away from African-American vaudeville. While conducting research at the Schomburg Center during the 1950s, Charles Edward Smith fell upon the photo of a black-faced Jelly Roll Morton which appeared in the "Theatrical" columns of the Indianapolis Freeman during the summer of 1914, when Morton was working in vaudeville; the black-face image seemed irreconcilable with Jelly the musician and "Inventor of Jazz."³ Black-face make-up and other trappings of nineteenth-century minstrelsy were commonly retained in the African-American vaudeville environment, but the intent was transformed by the application of a black perspective.

In New Orleans the new, self-determined black vaudeville-theatrical movement was defined by activities at the Iroquois Theater. This typical little "quick" vaudeville and moving-picture house was strategically located at 413-15 South Rampart Street, just a few doors up from the magnetic corner of Rampart and Perdido, in an area rife with music and entertainment venues. Richard M. Jones identified many of the area's musical hotspots on his classic "jazz map" in Esquire's 1945 Jazz Book.
While comparable in musical legend to Storyville, the South Rampart Street scene demonstrated "more of the characteristics of a neighborhood. So many of the street's denizens lived within a block of the action. So many knew each other that there was a genuine community atmosphere." As one of the neighborhood's vital organs, the Iroquois Theater provided a launching pad for home-grown talent as well as a community forum for travelling musicians and singers.

Information at hand suggests the Iroquois Theater was built during the fall of 1911 by neighborhood pharmacist George A. Thomas, who bought the property in 1909, when he was running the notorious Cracker Jack Drug Store at 435 South Rampart, just up the street. Thomas leased the Iroquois Theater to Paul L. Ford, who first opened for business during 1912.

Paul Ford was the son of Judge Thomas J. Ford, a well-connected politico who was heavily involved with the sporting life crowd. Listings in Soards' New Orleans City Directory suggest he gave up a career as an attorney with his father's law firm to run the Iroquois Theater. Like most white owners of African-American vaudeville houses, Paul Ford delegated the matter of artistic control to various black managers and players. Comments passed in The Freeman by veteran vaudevillian Edward L. "Dad" Howard during the fall of 1914 vouch for Ford's credibility with black performers:

Mr. Paul Ford, proprietor and manager of the Iroquois Theater, New Orleans, to all that wish to know, the team of Howard and Howard played the Iroquois Theater for three weeks last March and we have never worked for a nicer man than Mr. Ford, who is still a young manager but one that knows when he has an act and how to treat clever acts, and he never wants an act to please him. It is please my patrons with him.

A review of the Oral History Collection of the Hogan Jazz Archive and the "Theatrical" columns of two nationally distributed African-American weeklies - the Chicago Defender and especially the Indianapolis Freeman - leaves no doubt that the Iroquois Theater was a foundry of early blues and jazz activity. From 1913 to the end of the decade, the Iroquois Theater was on the creative front line of distinctively African-American entertainment in New Orleans.

News of the Iroquois started showing up in The Freeman during the final months of 1912. The first act known to have taken the Iroquois stage was that of Wallace M. Stovall and Nina Mitchell, appearing as Stovall & Stovall. Wallace was born in Louisville, Kentucky, while Nina, "the Indiana Nightingale," was from Indianapolis. They originally came to New Orleans as members of the John Rucker Musical Comedy Company, a major theatrical stock company featuring Irvin C. Miller and popular New Orleans native Esther Bigeou. They opened at the Temple Theater in New Orleans on Oct. 6, 1912, for a projected twenty-nine week stand.

The Temple Theater was located on the second floor of the prestigious Colored
Knights of Pythias building, known as the Pythian Temple, on old Saratoga (now Loyola) at Gravier Street. It wasn't just another "quick" vaudeville house; reflecting the tastes of an aspiring class, the Temple Theater dealt with legitimate theatrical stock companies and big-time road shows like the Black Patti Troubadours and Salem Tutt Whitney's Smart Set. Perhaps the Temple was pretentious to a fault; after opening auspiciously in 1909, it logged a frustrating history of financial vicissitudes, punctuated by internal bickering and several changes in management. By 1912 the Temple Theater was known throughout the theatrical profession as a "dead house." It was hoped that the John Rucker Musical Comedy Company could come in and resuscitate it.

Stovall & Stovall must have sensed early on that the Company's run at the Temple Theater would fall short of expectations. Noting that they had "made quite an impression with the New Orleans people" who saw them perform at the Temple during October 1912, the Stovalls advised Freeman readers that they would "close with the John Rucker show November 9th. Will open at a popular little vaudeville theater." An update on November 30, 1912 said, "Stovall and Stovall have not lost a day since they closed with the John Rucker show. They were booked at the Iroquois for one week and were held over for three weeks. They will open at the Pekin theater, Montgomery, Ala., November 25, with Memphis, and Nashville, Tenn., to follow."

Stovall & Stovall's act at the Iroquois was not specifically described, but Freeman citations from the same period indicate Nina was known for her "Indian characterization," which incorporated the "old song, 'Bleeding Moon,'" as well as up-to-date titles like "Navajo Rag." Wallace sang "Jungle Band," "All In, Down and Out" and other hits of the day, including his own original composition, "I Have So Much Troubles." The Stovalls went over well enough with Iroquois Theater patrons to warrant a return engagement during May 1913.

Their return to the Iroquois may have overlapped with an appearance by Zollie Ford and Jennie Thomas, who had just completed a tour of vaudeville theaters in Texas and northern Louisiana, as members of Ed Lee's New Orleans-based Creole Belles Company. The pianist with Lee's Creole Belles during this time was George W. Thomas, author of "New Orleans Hop Scop Blues," and it is possible Jennie Thomas was yet another member of the highly musical Thomas family.10 On April 26, 1913, The Freeman reported, "Zollie Ford, the well-known comedian, is now in his second week at the Iroquois Theater, and is still a favorite. His partner, Miss Jennie Thomas, is the talk [of] New Orleans... She is singing 'Daddie.'" The Freeman of May 17, 1913 noted, "Zollie Ford has just closed at the Iroquois theater, New Orleans, after a four week's engagement with great success. Opened at the Dream [another local vaudeville house] Sunday night. The team was a riot. Zallie's dancing kept them laughing. His partner, Miss Jennie Thomas, just must take three or four encores nightly, singing 'Harmony Joe.'"

The May 24, 1913 edition of The Freeman carried this off-hand quip: "The Too Sweets are at the Iroquois Theater, New Orleans, La. So you know the rest."
and Lula Perry - the Too Sweets - had been travelling the Southern vaudeville theater routes since 1909, at least. Prime examples of the husband-and-wife comedy team format that dominated African-American vaudeville, they mixed confrontational humor with vernacular dancing and blues singing. Their original song hit of 1913 was "I'm So Glad My Mama Don't Know Where I'm At." It was a vehicle for Lula Too Sweet's saucy, bad-little-girl stage persona, and she no-doubt performed it at the Iroquois:

I'm so glad my mamma don't know where I'm at, my papa either;
She can't catch me 'cause she is too big and fat, I'm goin' to tease her;
I'll get mine right where the sun don't never shine,
I'm goin' to the hall to see them do the Ballin' Jack;
I'm so glad my mamma don't know where I'm at.11

Held over at the Iroquois, the Too Sweets split a second week's bill with the inimitable Butler "String Beans" May, known as "The 'Elgin Movements' Man." Originally from Montgomery, Alabama, String Beans started making the rounds of Southern vaudeville theaters in 1909, when he was just fourteen years old. A provocative singer-pianist, "Beans" became the first full-blown, professional blues star. Marshall and Jean Stearns called him "an early Ray Charles."12 By the time of his tragic death in 1917, String Beans was famous throughout black America for his street-wise humor, contortive vernacular dancing and outrageous "blues pianologue."

### ADDELL JACKSON

**DAINTY SOUBRETTE**

That Little Girl with the Big Hat

Week of June 23d, Iroquois Theatre, New Orleans, La.

Block ad for the Iroquois Theater. (From The Freeman, June 28, 1913).

String Beans had a direct influence on Jelly Roll Morton's early career; Morton told Alan Lomax how Beans "used to bring down the house when he sang I Got Elgin Movements in My Hips, with a Twenty Year Guarantee and What Did Deacon Jones Do, My Lord, When the Lights Went Out, or Gimme a Piece of What You're Settin' On... and such stuff as that... He was the greatest comedian I ever knew, and a very, very swell fellow... He was the first guy I ever saw with a diamond in his mouth, and I guess I got the idea for my diamond from him."13 Beans' metaphor of "Elgin Movements" fell into common usage, and can be heard on a variety of Race recordings, including Eva Taylor's 1924 interpretation of the Spencer Williams favorite, "Everybody Loves My Baby."14

For at least a few weeks during the summer of 1913, String Beans served as the Iroquois Theater's stage manager. He generally performed with his wife Sweetie Matthews May; however, this appears to have been one of their frequent periods of estrangement. When Sweetie took the Iroquois stage that summer, she was teamed with another "dainty soubrette" named Adell Jackson. Sweetie Matthews May was a native New Orleanian who got her start in local stock company productions at Dixie Park during 1909. After splitting with String Beans in 1916, she joined Salem Tutt
Whitney’s Smart Set Company. At Chicago’s Monogram Theater in 1917, as a member of the Smart Set’s vocal "Jazz Trio," Sweetie did a "dizzy dance in Hula clothes, interpreted by the trap drummer and entering into the 'Weary Blues.'"

During January 1914 The Freeman noted, "Minor and Minor have been playing around New Orleans for eight weeks and have closed a successful two weeks' return engagement at the Iroquois in New Orleans, and will open at the Pekin theater, Montgomery, Ala., January 19, for two weeks. Miss Minor is singing Mr. Minor’s latest song, 'I Want You.' It gets ’em." The male member of this team, Coleman L. Minor, became famous for his original composition, "The Weary Way Blues."

In May 1914 the Iroquois "reopened its doors again [sic] after an extensive labor of remodeling, with another good local act that will be hard to beat, in Wade, Johnson and Winn." It’s likely this trio consisted of pianist Louis Wade, with local song-and-dance men Walter "Nooky" Johnson and Arthur Winn (or Wynn). All three of these men were well-known in the "District." New Orleans songster Lemon Nash testified that "Nooky" Johnson and future Race recording artist Willie Jackson sang with Hypolite Charles’ band at Tom Anderson’s Saloon before they became featured performers at the Iroquois. A Freeman note in July 1914 named Arthur Winn and "the peerless Walter (Nooky) Johnson" among those who "still hold their own and some one else’s at the Manhattan cabaret." During the early weeks of 1916, Louis Wade and "Nooky" Johnson were working together at the 25 Cabaret.

Because so much emphasis has been placed on Storyville as a primordial breeding ground of jazz, it is instructive to see how many players at the Iroquois Theater also performed in Storyville’s cabarets. In August 1914 The Freeman noted, "Miss Abby Sutton, who had a three week’s stay at the Iroquois theater is now at the little 25 - Frank Lalas. She is one of the best coon shouters we have." Acts at the Iroquois during September 1914 included "dainty little Aggie Tansel, who is a clever talker and a number one singer." In January 1916 the same Aggie Tansel was working at the 25 Cabaret with Louis Wade, Sidney Bechet, Willie Jackson and others.
Another act at the Iroquois during September 1914 was the Williams and Odum Company: "They are about the best singers that we have had in this city for a long time. They are beautiful girls with large, soft black eyes and beautiful dark curls. They are good and they never lay down the house." However, the "big noise" at the Iroquois that month was Hamtree Harrington, "a droll comedian who is really funny... He features his own original comical dance with which he is stopping the show entirely. He was forced to respond to several encores and curtain bows." During the 1920s, South Carolina-born James Carl "Hamtree" Harrington achieved a certain degree of fame in musicals like Creamer and Layton's "Strut Miss Lizzie," and in 1933 he performed with Ethel Waters in the Irving Berlin-Moss Hart vehicle, "As Thousands Cheer."16

The issue of "smut" was often tossed about on the "Theatrical" pages of The Freeman, and the Iroquois Theater was thrown into the controversy during the fall of 1914, when the team of Gray & Dunlop reported, "Mr. Ford has been fortunate in securing an all-star bill. It is hard for any performer to come here and 'make good' without using smut but this is one bill that cleans up without it. Gray and Dunlop keep the house in an uproar of laughter and applause during their entire act."

Iroquois proprietor Paul Ford felt compelled to respond to this unwitting indictment in an open letter which appeared in The Freeman of September 19, 1914:

Gentlemen: I write this letter to correct an erroneous impression that might result
from an article appearing in
the last week's issue. I can't
imagine how the present
entertainers conceived the
idea that they are the only
ones to score a hit at my
house without the aid of
smut. The reputation and
popularity of this house has
been established by the clever
acting of such performers as
"The Too Sweets," Pewers
[sic, the Pewees], Brown &
Harris, Walkers, Original
Rags, Muriel Ringgold,
Macks, Stovall, Howards,
and in fact scores of others as
clever as these, who, I
sincerely hope, will not feel
offended at my not
mentioning their names, as
time and space will not
permit, but who are always
welcome. I only mention
these because they have either
played return engagements or
were held over longer than
originally contracted for.
Anyone seeing the above
people act know that their
acts do not contain a
suggestion of smut and they
themselves, and in fact, all
other performers who have
made good in this house can
attest to the fact that no place
in the country will an
audience give more applause
to a clean act with new songs
and jokes than here.

The colored people
who patronize this theatre are
in the habit of going to all the
white houses in the city,
consequently, they see and
know actor [sic].

I have had teams here
to be rank failures, not
because they did not use
smut, but because their songs
and jokes were so old that
they were enjoyed only by
the younger generation, who
were probably too young to
be theatre-goers when they
originated. Any act that has
merit, new songs and
sayings, need have no fear of
coming here, as I guarantee
they will be howling
successes and will be held
over. Smut has never been
tolerated in this house, and
for that reason, no act has
ever made a hit with it...

Sending my best regards to
all, I remain

Paul Ford

Proprietor, Iroquois Theatre

A few weeks later, Dad Howard
wrote The Freeman from Muskogee,
Oklahoma, to defend the Iroquois' reputation:

Now as to smut. No
performer has to use smut
while playing the Iroquois.
With the right dope no act
can come too clean. At no
time, and I must say, while
we are not the greatest that has happened, we have and can make a week at any house in the country without resorting to the least bit of smut and balling the jack. Nor do we have to sing the "Blues" or "All Night Long." With best wishes to you, Mr. Ford, we hope to play your house again some day if you have an opening. We are now playing on the Lee time in Oklahoma. At the Globe, Okmulgee, September 21 to October 4 then Oklahoma City, October 5 to 18. Yours, Ed L. (Dad) Howard.

During the early weeks of 1915, The Freeman ran a column entitled "What's What Down In New Orleans." Submitted by Will Benbow, the inveterate black entertainment entrepreneur who had just assumed management of the local Poodle Dog Cabaret, "What's What Down In New Orleans" provided, along with other musical community news, a five-weeks' roster of headliners at the Iroquois Theater:

January 9, 1915 -
"Bruce & Bruce, Bailey & Bailey, Evans & Brown, with high class motion pictures."

January 16, 1915 -
"Seals-Fisher, original rags; Bailey & Bailey and first class motion pictures."

January 23, 1915 -
"Seals & Fisher is the one big talk of the Crescent City. The act is one of the best seen here. The patrons and manager of the Oridouis [sic] Theatre are more than pleased with the Seal & Fisher act. Original Rags is one of New Orleans’ favorites. He deserves it, as Rags always gets them with his novelty sayings and singing."

January 30, 1915 -
"Seals & Fisher, Davis & Davis, Dolly and Mazie, Billy Higgins."

February 6, 1915 -
"Davis & Davis, Billy Higgins and other acts."

The readily identifiable stand-outs on this roster are Seals & Fisher, Original Rags and Bruce & Bruce. Seals & Fisher consisted of Baby Franklin Seals and his female partner, Baby Floyd Fisher. As a pianist, Baby Seals was known to "put so much juice in your song that you will sing even when you don’t feel like singing." Originally from Mobile, Seals was no stranger to New Orleans. When his first composition, "You Got To Shake, Rattle and Roll," was published by Grunewald in 1910, Seals was living in the French Quarter at 411 Burgundy Street. His 1912 composition, "Baby Seals’ Blues," is the first vocal blues song known to have been published. About a year after appearing at the Iroquois Theater, Baby Seals died mysteriously, in Anniston, Alabama.

Original Rags was the stage name of Arthur Woolridge, who was famous for his ability to "rhyme" on members of the audience. The Freeman explained, "He is
essentially an extemporaneous versifier... He
wades out fearlessly, grabs up anybody and
on whom he makes up his lines with good
meter and perfect rhymes... One fears that
he will not turn up with the correct rhyme
owing to his rapidity, but he never fails."

Arthur Bruce and his New Orleans-
born partner Beatrice divided their time
between local theaters and cabarets until
1917, when they formed the stock company
that first took Sidney Bechet to Chicago.17
The Bruce Stock Company can be seen as an
outward manifestation of what the Iroquois
Theater had to offer. On October 27, 1917,
*The Freeman* ran a detailed review of their
presentation at the Booker T. Washington
Theater in Indianapolis:

Bruce Jazz Stock Company
Featuring Bruce & Bruce and Their
Creole Beauties

...The Jazz band craze
is now on, and the Bruce Jazz
Stock Company is... 
presenting jazz all the way.
The company has good
musicians. Louis Wade at the
piano; Sunday Bechet [sic],
clarinet; Johnny Sawyer,
traps.

The curtain goes up,
showing the jazz musical
outfit well arranged at the
back of the stage. About the
players hung the company's
own velvet curtain back
ground and sides, making a
rich and pleasing stage scene.
The appealing jazz music
strikes up, winning all at
once by the rocking jollity of
it all.

The part of the chorus
enters, takes up the rendition
"Honka Tonk Town"... The
girls wear jazz clothes if
possible, giving them the
freedom of their limbs which
they did not forget to use. It
was all so different -
spectacular and pleasing...

Madame Beatrice
Bruce... is all around in her
work, but shines as a soprano
singer... she sings "Joan of
Arc," a late song success...

Arthur Bruce and B.B.
Joyner are the comedians,
jazz comedians, for their
work is of that order...

Bruce is... a big hit
with his "Paradise Blues"
with his jazz band support...

Maggie Ellington does
finely in her song, "A Good
Man Now Is Hard to
Find."... Bruce, Joyner and
the jazz band helped in
support of Miss Ellington.

Lula Whidby... is a
regular joy spot... She sings
[Spencer Williams' 1916
"dance-craze" hit] "Stepping
On the Puppy's Tail" with
fine support by the company
and the jazz...

The piece-de-resistance is near the close when the bunch jazz it right through the audience. The company closes with a jazz dance, a happy final led by Arthur Bruce.

During March 1915, "Jones & Jones, the Orleans boy and his wife," were "making ever so good" at the Iroquois Theater. In addition, "Little Alma Hoges [sic], Hughes, the single," was "a big hit... Then comes that Texas boy and his Orleans wife, Burns and Burns. I mean Sandy and Gretchen is some team. Mr. Ford is well pleased with them. They are in their fourth week here. Will open Atlanta, Ga., the 15th." The "Orleans boy" was David Jones, future namesake member of the pathbreaking Jones and Collins Astoria Hot Eight. His partner, Lena Leggett, was often seen at Pete Lala's Cabaret, while Alma Hughes was a regular performer at the 25 Cabaret. Houston-based comedian Sandy Burns was well known throughout the Gulf Coast region. By Ferd Morton's own recollection, it was Sandy Burns who gave him the famous moniker, "Jelly Roll."^{18}

In June 1915 The Freeman mentioned, "Mack & Mack (Billie and Mary) are in their fourth week at the Iroquois theatre, New Orleans, La. After finishing will open their big summer tent show in the same city." Billie McBride was from Mobile, Alabama. He and his New Orleans-born wife Mary had been touring Southern vaudeville houses since they first got together in 1909,^{19} and they were among the earliest performers known to incorporate blues songs in their act. According to an April 1912 Freeman report from the Acme Theater in Meridian, Mississippi, "Everybody rocked" to Mary Mack's rendition of "Indian Blues." Mack & Mack's 1920s Race recordings generally reflect the independent vaudeville repertoire of the previous decade; "Black But Sweet, Oh God!" which they recorded with Punch Miller in 1925, was reportedly sung in a Galveston, Texas vaudeville house during the summer of 1910.

The Freeman reported in December 1915 that "Emmett Anthony arrived in New Orleans on the S.S. Brunswick.Opened at the Iroquois Theatre Monday... Address all mail to Emmett Anthony, 413 Rampart street, New Orleans, La." Anthony was one of the preeminent African-American yodlers of the decade. By no means an oddity, he was in competition with several adept practitioners, including "yodler blues singer" Charles Anderson, from Birmingham, and "America's only colored lady yodler," Beulah Henderson, from New Orleans.^{20}

Sadly missing from The Freeman is documentation of the Iroquois Theater's pit band. There is only one mention, in passing, during February 1916, that "Eddie Robertson [sic], trapdrummer, formerly of the Iroquois Theater," had left to join Alexander Tolliver's Big Show. This was Eddie "Rabbit" Robinson, identified in New Orleans Jazz: A Family Album as the drummer in Kid Ory's first band. Cornetist Willie Hightower, who led the band with Tolliver's Big Show, recalled that "Rabbit" had studied with Walter Brundy, the drummer with John Robichaux's Orchestra.^{21}

A major tented spectacle of variety
entertainment, Tolliver's Big Show had stirred up a lot of local interest while wintering in New Orleans. Other New Orleans musicians who joined the 1916 tour with Tolliver's Big Show included Alvin "Zoo" Robertson, John Porter and David Jones. Apparently, one of the drummers who followed "Rabbit" Robinson at the Iroquois Theater was Abby "Chinee" Foster, who went on to play "with Buddy Petit and Celestin's Original Tuxedo Jazz Orchestra - two of the top jazz outfits in the region," and who was playing at Preservation Hall when he died in 1962. By "Chinee" Foster's own testimony:

His first 'regular' job was at the Iroquois Theater... where he replaced Louis 'Two Hits' Scott... While at the Iroquois, Foster used a home-made snare drum crafted from a banjo head and a pair of sticks worked from chair rungs. He stayed at the Iroquois for less than a year, leaving in 1916 to join Jack Carey's band.  

In March 1916 Billie and Mary Mack let Freeman readers know that they were back "in dear old New Orleans - not resting up, but in their third week at the Iroquois Theatre, with the 'Columbia' to follow indefinitely. And then the old tent show all summer." A blurb in July of that year noted, "Miss Gertrude Williams is going big at the Iroquois theater... singing [Perry] 'Mule' Bradford's 'Lonesome Blues.'" A couple of months later, it was mentioned in the Chicago Defender that "Edna Landry of the Iroquois theater" sang at a party at the old St. Charles Hotel.  

Edna Landry was a native New Orleanian, and a half-sister to Lizzie Miles. By 1914 she and William Benbow had been seen in theaters throughout the South, as "the Creole and the Coon." Edna was the Creole. During the early months of 1915 she
was a regular at the infamous Poodle Dog Cabaret, "featuring her new song, the 'Home Blues.'" Between March 1923 and March 1924 she made scores of Race recordings - mostly blues songs - as Edna Hicks. She would probably be as well-remembered as Lizzie Miles, had she not died in a grisly gasoline fire back in 1925.25

During November 1916 The Freeman reported, "The old reliable Chas. Arrant is back at the Iroquois. We gladly welcome him, as his performances are all his own, exclusively. We also welcome his very clever wife as a mighty factor in his success." Charles and Lena Arrant were best known for their "blues killing special, 'The Blues Revival,'" which featured Charles Arrant's eccentric slide trombone playing. After catching this act in Atlanta during the summer of 1914, Perry Bradford described Charles Arrant as "the man who plays trombone with his feet, knocking them a twisting. Had the house in an uproar when he hit them Blues."

Sharing the Iroquois stage with Charles and Lena Arrant was a "noted ventriloquist" named William McCormick, who reportedly pulled off "some awful stunts" which "kept the house wild with enthusiasm." Following the Arrants and William McCormick, Hamtree Harrington and his wife Maude played a return date at the Iroquois, and were said to be "screams with their two piece band."

The December 23, 1916 Freeman noted Billie and Mary Mack had "just closed three weeks at the Metropolitan Theater, Memphis," and were back in New Orleans for the winter: "Friends, write, care Iroquois Theater." They appeared on the Iroquois' big "New Years Week Bill," along with "Haywood, the hand-cuff king," who "held the large audiences spellbound nightly as he made a seven minute escape from ropes, chains, handcuffs and straightjacket," and Andrew and Louise Fairchild: "For ragtime singing, dancing and coon comics they can't be beat." Closing the show was "Viola Scott (better known as Chesapeake) a New Orleans product, and some comedienne."

As the new year rolled around, The Freeman noted, "Ernest Sessions, the Iroquois operator [i.e., movie projectionist] is still on the job, and always ready for biz. He is also stage manager and the ghost [i.e., paymaster]." On January 20, 1917, The Freeman described this "Bill at the Iroquois Theatre":

\begin{quote}
Jones and Jones (David and Lena Leggett), late of Tolliver's Smart Set, were one big scream with comedy, singing and dancing and ragtime selections on the cornet and melophone. This is a good act.
\end{quote}

As a single, Gallie Gaston can not be beat. His rendition of "If I Forget" won much applause, and his wench turn was a riot.

Mack and Mack (Billy and Mary) closed the bill and went big as usual. This is their third week, but just as good as first.

Ernest Sessions, the operator and ghost, says, "Hello, Charles Arrant. Did
you get the meat for the beans for Lena?” Regards to Blanche Russell.

The next week’s Freeman carried a follow-up report:

Mr. Ford, Jr., presented his feature bill this week in the persons of White and Drew, who have bridged success. They are taking encores on every number. Miss Grant is doing a very neat single with good dancing. Chas. Ross of Ross and Ross is working this week with Gallie De Gaston, who is the favorite of the house. De Gaston is singing the latest ballads and stops the show nightly. Ross sings a parody on "I Can Beat You Doing What You’re Doing Me," and is a scream. The house is doing great business. Mr. Ford wishes to hear from acts of all kinds.

"I Can Beat You Doing What You’re Doing Me" was one of Clarence Williams’ early sheet music successes. Shortly after Charles Ross sang it at the Iroquois, Clarence Williams himself took the Iroquois stage, with Lena Leggett’s sister Josephine as his partner. The March 31, 1917 Freeman carried this report:

Clarence Williams, the song writer, and Josephine Leggett, are in their third week at the Iroquois, stopping the show nightly with their new act, "In the Music Shop." They were requested to keep it on another week. They are singing Williams’ latest songs, "I Never Knew What the Blues Were Until You Went Away" and "Mamma’s Baby Boy." Hello Lena and David Jones. Williams’ new songs will be out soon. Watch the Freeman.

"I Can Beat You Doing What You’re Doing Me," one of the early sheet music hits of Clarence Williams.
must have proven conducive to this aim.

During August 1917 the "Good Bill At the Iroquois" included Arthur Boykin and Hezekiah Jenkins. When this same team appeared at a theater in Indianapolis just a few weeks later, The Freeman noted they "hail from the South, bringing with them a budget of entirely new offerings... Hezekiah Jenkins introduces one of his own song successes, 'I'm Going to Pizen You.' ...Jenkins belongs to the class of good comedians, being original and as funny as he cares to be." Between 1924 and 1931, Hezekiah Jenkins made Race recordings of titles like "Mouth Organ Blues" and "Conger Blues" for Columbia and Gennett.

Hezekiah Jenkins played guitar on his commercial recordings, and it's likely he also played guitar on his Iroquois Theater gigs. The great New Orleans-born guitarist Lonnie Johnson also played at the Iroquois in 1917, accompanied by his piano-playing brother, James "Steady Roll" Johnson. Lonnie Johnson went on to play and record with some of the most important musical groups in jazz history, and he is considered to be among the preeminent blues and jazz guitarists of all time.

In March 1918 Hezekiah Jenkins played a return date at the Iroquois with a new partner, Blanche Russell, who had played opposite Boykin & Jenkins in Indianapolis. She sang the H. Alf Kelley/J. Paul "Pensacola Kid" Wyer composition, "Long Lost Blues." Sharing the Iroquois


Of course, Clarence Williams was a jazz pioneer in every sense. If his "new act, 'In the Music Shop'" drew on personal experiences at the Williams & Piron Publishing Company, it probably owed as well to Irvin Miller's earlier musical farce by the same title. Apparently, Williams was something of a regular at the Iroquois Theater during the spring of 1917. A note in the Chicago Defender in May of that year mentioned "Clarence Williams in original songs at [the] Iroquois." Williams was intent on promoting his blues-and-jazz heavy song catalogue, and the Iroquois Theater...
stage with Jenkins & Russell were Muriel Ringgold, “the leading comédienne of her race;” Ernest Watts, “the man that smokes cigars;” and Little Gallie De Gaston, “the baby who certainly entertains. Some single.”

On May 11, 1918, this bit of hard news appeared in *The Freeman*, apparently submitted by Roy White of the team of Melba & White:

**Performer seized by Federal Authorities**

New Orleans, La., Special

Melba & White opened at the Iroquois theater... Monday the 29th. After the first performance Melba was seized by the federal authorities and placed in the Paris [sic] prison on account of not having his registration card, but Mrs Ford and his partner, Roy White, have been working hard to get him out and they think he will be out in a short time. In the meantime Roy White is featuring the patriotic song, "Homeward Bound," with much success and stopping the show with my wife’s song, "The Jelly Roll Blues." The bill consists of such talent as Johnnie Woods and little Henry, Ted Pope, electric wire walker; Mack & Mack, and Roy White. Roy White sends regards to his wife, Edmonia H. White and the Davenports.

It is not known whether "The Jelly Roll Blues" claimed by Edmonia H. White was related to Jelly Roll Morton's composition by that title. 31

At some point during its illustrious history, the Iroquois Theater stage was graced by Louis Armstrong. Armstrong left a cryptic note in one of his unpublished memoirs, to the effect that he would go to see movies at the Iroquois for ten cents, and that he "dipped [his] face in flour" and won an amateur contest. 32 One of Armstrong's old neighborhood friends, Godfrey Moore, 33 was identified in the 1914 *Soard's Directory* as a "ticket taker" - and resident - at the Iroquois Theater.

There was precious little news from the Iroquois Theater after 1918. The last city directory listing for Paul L. Ford as proprietor of the Iroquois was in 1919. A final note in *The Freeman* of June 26, 1920 assured, "The Iroquois Theatre, New Orleans, La. will be glad to hear from all performers. Good acts wanted always. Leo G. Ford, Prop. Zeno Green, mgr." Leo Ford was Paul Ford's younger brother. 34

Whether or not the change in management was a factor, live vaudeville entertainment does not appear to have fared well at the Iroquois Theater after 1920. Increased competition was certainly a factor in the demise of vaudeville activity at the Iroquois. On February 24, 1919, 35 the 2000-seat Lyric Theater, corner of Burgundy and Iberville streets, was opened as a black vaudeville house. Touted as "America's Largest and Finest Colored Theatre," 36 the Lyric became the theater of choice. It was considered the "flagship theatre" of the
T.O.B.A. circuit, and it brought the hottest black national acts of the 1920s to New Orleans.

It appears that the post-1920 history of the Iroquois Theater was spent in screening motion pictures, interspersed, perhaps, with a few "quick" vaudeville acts. The Iroquois was listed in the city directories as a "Moving Picture Theatre" until 1927, when it disappeared altogether.

The final blow to the Iroquois must have come with the opening of Loew's State Theater at 1108 Canal Street, on April 3, 1926. This was a state-of-the-art, mainstream "Picture Palace," and, in the face of Jim Crow, owner Marcus Loew made a conscious effort to attract black customers. An elaborate "Colored Entrance" was installed on the side of the building, which opened onto the 100 block of South Rampart, just three blocks down from the Iroquois. The "Colored Entrance" had a marble lobby and staircase leading to a second balcony which offered the same amenities and comforts extended to the white customers below.

Amidst the ravages of wholesale demolition for surface-level parking lots, the Iroquois Theater is still standing, one of four significantly historical buildings left on the 400 block of South Rampart Street. The building managed to survive subsequent uses without forfeiting all of its distinctively theatrical architectural features. Boarded up for years now, it is amazingly well preserved; it is the only small, early-twentieth century theater structure left in New Orleans with a virtually intact front facade. There is a double center entrance door, two single side exit doors and a ticket window, all set back several feet from a large ground floor opening. The opening is framed by a brick faced lintel on top, and two simple pilasters on each side, in conjunction with the second-story facade.

A movement is underway to save the Iroquois Theater from the wrecking ball. In an April 1993 report, the Congressionally-appointed National Park Service Jazz Advisory Commission gave the Iroquois Theater its highest recommendation as a landmark worth preserving. This Commission was co-chaired by respected jazz educator Ellis Marsalis and former Congresswoman Lindy Boggs. The Iroquois Theater has also been nominated for local historical landmark status by the Central Business District Historic Landmark Commission. It should be on the National Register of Historic Places.

From the standpoint of jazz history, the Iroquois Theater is hallowed ground. Standing in front of this place, one can mingle with the spirits - Louis Armstrong rounding the corner of Perdido and Rampart, making his way to the stage door; Clarence Williams heading up from his Tulane Avenue shop, anxious to test a few of his latest hits on a sympathetic audience. Inside, drummer Eddie "Rabbit" Robinson executes a few paradiddles, loosening up the wrists, while pianist Louis Wade lifts the cover on the old upright; backstage there's Mack & Mack, Edna Landry, Lonnie Johnson and a thousand other blues and jazz pioneers, famous and forgotten, all awaiting their curtain call.

The legendary cabarets of Storyville were levelled fifty years ago, and many other historic jazz landmarks have since
fallen to short-sighted "progress." In the city whose most valuable natural resource is jazz, the powerful little Iroquois Theater is still waiting in the wings.

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Notes
All references to musical activities during 1910-1920 which are not endnoted, or the source of which is not otherwise identified in the text, are drawn from Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff's collaborative survey of the Indianapolis Freeman.


5. The plumbing application was filed at the Sewerage and Water Board on August 23, 1911.

6. Note in plumbing application file for 413-15 South Rampart Street.

7. Collected information from the Insurance Maps of New Orleans, published by the Sanborn Map Company, New York; Soard's New Orleans City Directory, 1905-1925; and the property transaction files compiled by the staff of the Central Business District Historic District Landmarks Commission suggests this scenario: When the property at 413-15 South Rampart Street changed hands in 1890, it was just a vacant lot. By 1908 there was a small, wood frame structure on the site. In 1909 the property changed hands twice. The second sale, on July 4, 1909, was to George A. Thomas, who had a drug store at 1132 Poydras Street until 1906, when he moved to 435 South Rampart. The first appearance of the Iroquois Theater in Soard's New Orleans City Directory is in 1913, and there are three listings in that year. It is listed alphabetically in the general directory as "Iroquois Theatre Paul L. Ford propr 413 S. Rampart"; in the "Theatres (Pictures)" section as "Iroquois 413 S. Rampart"; and again alphabetically as "Ford Paul L. propr Iroquois Theatre 413 S. Rampart r. 122 N. Rampart."

9. It can be deduced from U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States - 1900*, vol. 25, E.D. 38, Sheet 3, Line 1, that Paul Ford was 31 years old in 1914.

10. Originally from Texas, and well-represented on Race recordings, this famous family included George W. Thomas, Hociel Thomas, Hershal Thomas and Sippie Wallace.

11. "I'm So Glad My Mama Don't Know Where I'm At," words and music by Willie Too Sweet, Syndicate Music Co., St. Louis, 1915.


13. Notes from an unrecorded portion of the Alan Lomax interview with Jelly Roll Morton at the Library of Congress, as rescued from the files by the indomitable Bill Russell.


22. Bruce Raeburn, *op. cit.*

23. Bill Russell and Ken Mills interview with Abby "Chinee" Foster, June 29, 1960, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University, as paraphrased in Bruce Raeburn, *op. cit.*


27. Chicago *Defender*, May 12, 1917, as noted in Steiner and Sengstock, *op. cit.*


30. The "Mrs. Ford" reference appears to be a typographical error as Paul Ford seems to have never been married, although there is a possibility that it refers to his mother, since she may have helped with both her son's theater and her husband's law practice. ("Deaths" and *Census*).


32. Louis Armstrong, unpublished 129-page manuscript, written in longhand between 1968 and 1971, and housed at the Louis Armstrong Archive, Queens College, Corona, New York. Thanks to Tad Jones for sharing this reference.

33. See "Crowd Struggles To See Cornetist," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, June 7, 1931, p. 12, c. 2; *Soards' Directory*, New Orleans, 1931. Thanks to Tad Jones for these citations.

34. *Census*.


41. The facades of similar remaining theater structures of the period, such as the Alamo, the No-Name, and the Trianon (all on Canal Street) have been modified severely.


43. Building Nomination File, CBDHLC.
A Ditty a Day

by
Diana Rose

It is a rare pleasure to announce the completion of a major project that details the fascinating information that is available through research into the library's various collections of 19th century popular sheet music. The operative word here is popular, because this music generally qualifies as neither classical nor folk, although both forms contributed to its genesis.

During the last century, our ancestors apparently had an insatiable need to document their emotions and experience through putting it all down in musical form. With over 5,000 individual listings on a specially designed sheet now available in computer form, it makes the previously rather formidable task of locating a specific piece of old music an entertaining project. Encountering titles such as "Mary, the Pride of the Dairy, is my Sweetheart"; "And Her Golden Hair was Hanging Down Her Back"; "Dance of the Black Cats, Dedicated to the Hoo Hoos" or "Kiss Me Quickly Before I Die" should titillate anyone's interest in further examination. The classicists can keep their sonatas and symphonies.

Louisianians had another viewpoint, and it makes fascinating reading. Although the titles of this music often seem quaintly outdated, they remain a reader's joy. Where else could you experience "Eve's Lamentations" or "The Joys That We've Tasted" without feeling a pang of interest. Perhaps "Too Late, Too Late" or "Who Will Care for Mother Now" offset the humor implied in "Two New Sports in Town" or "Three Meals a Day and a Dollar To Spend!" How about dancing the "Juden Jutzig Polka," the "Contraband Schottisch," or a "Pelican Waltz." In the computerized listings the "1st Regiment of Louisiana Volunteers" is followed by the "2nd Pensie Melodieuse" then on to "3 Reveries" and the "4th Batallion Sound Off," and finally a "5th Nocturne." These musical gems are preceded by a number of street address titles such as "The 127 March," "136 Canal St. Quick Step," the "167 Polka" and "199 Broad Street Waltz." And to think we haven't even begun to explore the titles beginning with "A." However, one title comes to mind. The "Ambulance Galop" should be mentioned here, as the cover art work shows a pair of horses galloping down the cobblestone street drawing a buggy emblazoned with the letters "CHARITY Ambulance." Also on this cover is another sketch that closely resembled the first Charity Hospital. Architecture buffs should be fascinated. Not to be outdone, an inset sketch shows a victim in the gutter, head swathed in bandages, carefully being attended by two well-dressed gentlemen in hats (presumably of the ambulance corps) while awaiting pickup. After inspecting this vivid example of our history, you can scan the list of music titles and find "I cannot Dance Tonight," possibly an aftermath of the previous ditty. All these traumas could have led to "The Grey Hairs of My Mother." Let's hope this saga didn't engender the writing of "Visions of Paradise."

As you can see, if something could be talked about, argued over, debated, danced, or dreamed, it found its way into our musical heritage. It is truly a rare glimpse into the past of the city that care forgot - but music didn't.
Examples of 19th century sheet music from the Special Collections Division at the Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.
Ory Baptismal Certificate  
by  
John McCusker

Pioneer trombonist Edward "Kid" Ory's birthday, like those of many early jazzmen, has been a point of contention. Though he always claimed to have been born on Christmas morning, he named different years in different interviews. For example, Vivian Boarman and Cy Shain, in "Kid Ory", Jazz Music, vol. 3, No. 7 (1947) gave his year of birth as 1889, while in most post-1940s interviews he stated 1886 (such as the interview with Neshui Ertegun and Bob Campbell for Life Magazine, April 20, 1957, held at the Hogan Jazz Archive). In his article, "Johnny Dodds in New Orleans," American Music, 8 (Winter 1990), Gene Anderson found different birth dates given on various documents, including a marriage certificate and a draft registration card. His informed speculation, working with the sources available, was that Ory may well have been born later, in 1889.

It is very easy to assume that in later years Ory claimed to be older to enhance his place in jazz history - much like Bunk Johnson and Jelly Roll Morton apparently did. However, it now appears that Ory's birthday was actually the earlier date.

According to records obtained from the Archdiocese of New Orleans Archives, Edward (spelled Eduard on the document) Ory was born on Dec. 25, 1886. The record, which is written in French, comes from the baptismal register in a community near Ory's hometown of LaPlace.

In addition to clearing up the date question, the certificate also lists the correct names and spellings of Ory's parents. In an article in the Macon (Georgia) Telegraph, December 26, 1958, Ory's parents are listed as "John Osenee and Octavie Ory." According to the church document, however, his parents were Ozemé Ory and Octavie Devezin. These names are confirmed on sister Marie Lisida Ory's baptismal certificate from 1889, where the parents are listed as Ozemé Ory and Octavie [Ory]. However, it is clear that most people knew Ory's father as John.

The sister's baptismal certificate also gives credence to Ory's claim of Christmas Day as his birthday in that Marie's birthday is listed as December 16. Since both baptisms were conducted by the same priest, Rev. E. Badoil, it is probably safe to assume
that Ory's date was not "rounded off" to the closest holiday (as was the case with Armstrong's "Fourth of July" birthday).

Information from the baptismal records provides several leads for future Ory research. Since the proper spellings of the family names are now available it is possible to trace his lineage. The names of the Godparents of both Edouard and Marie also provide an opportunity to learn something of the family's social circle.

ATTENTION - Friends of the Jazz Archive: Just a reminder that 1995 membership fees are now due. Traditionally, only about 25% of the cost of producing *The Jazz Archivist* has come from annual fees; the rest has been contributed by the Archive, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, and the Music Department. For the future, we would like to increase the percentage covered by the Friends to half, so all that can do so are now asked to remit the $15 dues for 1995. We thank you for your past support and look forward to further progress in the future.